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ABSTRACT

Forty-five individuals from a wide range of organizations and backgrounds participated in a national roundtable on learning in Canada. Working in small groups and plenaries, participants proposed a vision for learning as a way to address the widely expressed concern that Canada is not moving fast enough to increase learning opportunities and to remove barriers to learning. The proposed comprehensive learning system included the following priorities: (1) valuing and supporting universal early childhood education; (2) investing in high-quality, universal, publicly delivered primary and secondary education; (3) ensuring excellence, equitable access, and program delivery within Canada's higher education system; and (4) enabling all adults to have ongoing opportunities to maintain and enhance literacy and learning skills. The discussions focused on assessing needs, barriers, and opportunities and on identifying outcomes and then coalesced into the following guiding principles: (1) all Canadians need opportunities to learn throughout their lives; (2) lifelong learning must be both inclusive and diverse; and (3) governments must take the lead by providing supports, incentives, and infrastructure and by convening stakeholders. Nineteen priority actions were identified, and government, employer, institution, and individual roles in achieving the vision for learning were delineated. The background paper "Learning in the 21st Century: Key Issues and Questions" (Graham S. Lowe) is appended. (MN)

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Report on the National Learning Roundtable

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Report on the National Learning Roundtable

March 19-20, 2001
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Introduction

Learning is a societal project that requires a bold new policy framework to guide the actions of all stakeholders. This is the main conclusion reached by the 45 participants, from a wide range of organizations and backgrounds, at the National Roundtable on Learning convened by the Canadian Policy Research Networks on behalf of Human Resources Development Canada. Roundtable participants called for immediate, transformative actions on many fronts in order to achieve "lifelong learning for all."

The purpose of the Roundtable was to engage in open dialogue on three major themes: assessing learning and skill needs; removing barriers and accessing opportunities; and identifying learning outcomes. A background paper highlighted key issues and questions on these themes. Participants worked hard in small groups and plenaries to develop a vision of learning for Canada, guiding principles, and recommendations for immediate action.

The Hon. Lyle Oberg, Minister of Alberta Learning, and the Hon. Jane Stewart, Minister of Human Resources Development Canada, launched the Roundtable on a note of optimism. As Minister Stewart stated in her speech, "we've got an extraordinarily good education system here in Canada, and we should be proud of it. But we can't rest on our laurels... there are things that we have to change, to improve upon, to imagine and implement that are reflective of our new reality in the 21st century."

Canada's Vision for Learning

Participants proposed a Vision for Learning as a way to address the widely expressed concern at the Roundtable that Canada is not moving fast enough to increase learning opportunities and to remove barriers to learning. Acknowledging our past successes in education, the vision is a strong commitment that learning in the future must occur throughout a person's life. This is vital not only for the well-being of the individual, but for a healthy society and economy. A comprehensive learning system has four linked priorities:

1) Valuing and supporting universal early childhood education, making it an integral part of the learning system so that all children develop the literacy skills they need to become lifelong learners.

2) Investing in high quality, universal, publicly delivered primary and secondary education.

3) Ensuring excellence, equitable access, and program diversity within Canada's higher education system. Programs must provide a balance of technical, analytical and people skills. Universities must equally value and invest in humanities-based and science and technology-based disciplines. Educating the whole person and training for specific skills will occur simultaneously.

4) Enabling all adults to have ongoing opportunities to maintain and enhance literacy and learning skills. A wide range of disadvantaged groups – whose needs have been

well documented – will require new resources to participate fully. Accordingly, greater recognition to prior formal and informal learning will facilitate the development and fuller use of people's talents.

While there was not enough time to reach consensus on every word of this vision, it does capture the tone of the Roundtable. Work remains to be done on a number of contentious issues. For example, there was no consensus at the Roundtable about the role for private institutions in the educational system or on the best mechanisms for improving access to post-secondary education (e.g., through tuition fee reductions, RESPs, learning accounts, or other means). Nor was there agreement on the right balance between individual responsibility for learning and the responsibility of governments and private actors, particularly employers.

Despite broad consensus at the Roundtable that disadvantaged groups deserve immediate attention, there was no agreement reached on which groups should be on this list. However, participants often pointed to the barriers faced by Aboriginals, adults with low literacy, people with disabilities, high school dropouts, and poor single-parent mothers. In the end, the Roundtable suggested incorporating these and other disadvantaged groups into a comprehensive learning policy framework, rather than continuing current piecemeal interventions.

Even so, the convergence of political and economic trends in the country created a palpable sense of urgency at the Roundtable to move from discussion to sustained actions. The next 18 months will be the right time to launch a learning agenda. However, participants emphasized that action is complicated by the lack of a "national guardian" on learning issues – an observation that led to calls for leadership across all stakeholders to initiate joint actions.

Highlights of Roundtable Discussions

This vision emerged after intensive discussion, and debate, in breakout groups and plenary sessions of the three themes described in the background paper. The following summary of these conversations provides the backdrop to the vision, principles and recommended actions crafted by Roundtable participants in the plenary sessions.

1) Assessing Needs:

> *This theme focused on defining and assessing the learning and skills needs (current, medium-term, or long-term) of specific groups of individuals, sectors, and types of employers.*

A starting point for Roundtable discussions was the shared recognition that skills, knowledge and innovation are the key drivers behind Canada's economic and social prosperity. This begs two closely linked questions: How can the benefits of prosperity be most widely shared? And, how can we foster prosperity by ensuring that all citizens have a chance to contribute? Indeed, for most Roundtable participants, the answer is that sharing

prosperity depends on an inclusive approach to learning right from an early age. In the words of one delegate, "How do we make sure that nobody gets left behind in a learning society?"

Disadvantaged groups. Participants gave many examples of disadvantaged groups that do not have the resources or basic skills to engage in lifelong learning. These include: individuals on welfare; adults with low levels of literacy; the working poor; Aboriginals; new Canadians whose credentials are not recognized; and individuals with disabilities. Participants noted the well-documented links between the conditions of poverty, on the one hand, and low levels of literacy and educational attainment, on the other hand. The ability to learn is created in childhood. So for children from poor families, the effects of their background are cumulative – as they grow older, these individuals risk being left further behind and the challenges of overcoming obstacles to learning grow. This discussion underscored the importance of viewing learners as individuals who are part of identifiable groups.

Barriers to adult literacy. Roundtable discussions of literacy coalesced around three key points. First, children need good basic literacy and numeracy skills if they are to succeed in school and become adaptable lifelong learners. Second, many adults who want to improve their literacy skills face barriers, including how literacy training programs are organized, difficulty accessing these programs, and the stigma attached to not being able to read. Third, the skill content and design of jobs requires more attention if we are to ensure that higher-level literacy is put to use, so these capacities are not lost.

Broad-based access. By recognizing the learning needs of everyone, we can create a learning society. The Roundtable emphasized that we know the learning needs of disadvantaged groups and therefore are in a position to act on these immediately. But unlike the past, such interventions cannot be just "another program," but must be part of an integrated framework to promote widespread access to learning opportunities. The challenge is to enable all Canadians to learn in family, formal education, employment and community contexts. If we assume that all Canadians have the right to learn and to be educated, then we can look at where and why this does not happen as a way of meeting the goal of equal opportunity.

Learner diversity. One of the discussion groups identified different groups of learners based on age, ability to learn, situation, education level, or socio-economic status. The group concluded that there is no "standardized learner." A continuum of learning exists from young children to working age and seniors, and individuals' needs at each stage in their life will vary depending on their resources and socio-economic circumstances. While there is a lot of research regarding child psychology development and assessing children when they are young, these tools do not exist to assess the diversity of learner profiles throughout various life-course stages.

Transition challenges. We therefore need different ways of promoting and enabling learning across the life course. It is essential to recognize that individuals must be adaptable to cope with transitional periods, such as moving between levels in the educational system, moving between jobs, retirement, moving in and out of the workforce, and responding to changing skill requirements in rapidly changing workplaces. While learning

can contribute to successful transitions, people may require support and assistance to reduce disruptive effects.

Universal access to what? While education must be accessible and affordable, Roundtable participants considered how to expand universal education at both ends of the age spectrum – to help children develop foundational literacy skills and to support the growing numbers of adults with learning needs. Because the evidence suggests that children who take part in early childhood education programs prior to starting school will learn better in school, there was much discussion, and agreement, regarding the need for universal access to early childhood education. However, participants did not insist that early childhood education should be compulsory, since many Canadians believe that starting regular schooling too early is not necessary for their children's success.

Valuing formal and informal learning. After critically assessing common definitions of learning, training and education, participants suggested the following revisions. We can, and should, educate and train at the same time, which requires mechanisms for linking workplaces and schools. We also must recognize the contribution of informal learning to economic and social achievement. As a society, we must place more value on informal learning. Institutions such as community libraries and the Internet have opened up new frontiers in this regard, so they need to be strengthened.

Valuing hard skills and soft skills. The Roundtable also called for a broad, liberal definition of education and learning that emphasizes citizenship, the arts, and critical and creative thinking. While education is crucial for employment, we need to celebrate its human social citizenship value. Innovative workplaces require a wide range of "people" and intellectual skills, in addition to technical skills. Yet, employers are not equipped to develop these broadly-based competencies, so the public education system will continue to play a crucial role in this regard, in particular through the liberal arts.

Valuing multiple learning contexts. Effective policy responses to the diversity of learning needs must acknowledge the multiple contexts in which individuals learn. For example, higher education is not just about going to university. In fact, while Canadians value post-secondary education there is a bias in favour of universities. As a result, skilled trades to not receive adequate recognition, or in fact have a negative image, so young people often do not have the information they need to make informed decisions. These public perceptions must change.

Individual and collective responsibility. Striking the right balance between individual and collective responsibilities for learning surfaced as a contentious issues. How do people take responsibility for their learning, from early childhood on? What motivates people to become actively engaged as learners, teachers and mentors? What role should employers play in encouraging learning among employees? As these questions were debated, several participants argued that it is not helpful to blame individuals for not taking responsibility for their own learning or to blame schools for failing to meet certain educational goals.

2) Barriers and Opportunities

> *This theme addressed two related issues: the barriers that specific individuals or employers face in meeting their learning needs, and actual or potential opportunities that can enhance an individual's or organization's capacity to meet learning needs.*

Roundtable participants noted that while individuals sometimes are unaware of what skills they lack or possess, this type of individual barrier to learning is far overshadowed by contextual, institutional and systemic barriers. Even though barriers took up much of the discussion time on this theme, Roundtable participants pointed to the many opportunities for advancing a learning agenda, especially by building on our existing strengths.

Cultural barriers. The contexts in which people learn largely reflect our cultures. Some of the most prevalent barriers to learning, in the view of Roundtable participants, therefore, are cultural in origin. This point generated a lively discussion of the characteristics of a learning culture. Several participants asked: "How do you create a lifelong learner? Where do we put money to ensure this?" Furthermore, cultural barriers reduce the learning opportunities available for specific groups: Aboriginals, immigrants and rural students. Aboriginals, in particular, face cultural barriers other Canadians do not understand, including quite different learning styles. The bias toward traditional classroom and institution-based learning acts as a barrier to other less formalized approaches .

It was generally agreed that successful lifelong learning activity requires individuals to possess solid general skills, and governments have a key role in this regard through public education, but governments' role is less clear when it comes to providing specific skills. Beyond this, some provocative points were raised. One suggestion was to offer a certificate to show lifelong learning skills. However, others observed that such an approach may be inconsistent with the assumption that lifelong learning involves empowering individuals to make choices about what they want to learn. This perspective raises the further issue of how learning opportunities could, or should, be directed at the skills most needed by the economy at any given time. Certainly there is more to be said along this line.

Institutional barriers. Well-designed educational and training institutions can be powerful enablers of learning. Yet, institutions have been slow to develop the flexibility and choices learners need. Also lacking are effective policy incentives to sustain and develop partnerships among institutions – a prerequisite for inventing new approaches, in the view of participants. Furthermore, mobility within the post-secondary system is hampered by existing credential recognition procedures. Residents outside the large urban centres have limited opportunities for continuing education and learning. And it is unclear how the Internet and "e-learning" will offer solutions, given the "digital divide." Moreover, on-line learning content may not be relevant to specific groups. A potential barrier to post-secondary education for some students is rising tuition costs. Within workplaces there are many barriers to learning. For example, lifelong learning will require people to take time off work, but most employers have not developed ways to support this.

Systemic barriers. Many of the greatest barriers to learning are systemic. Discussions of these barriers focused on societal conditions, specifically how poverty and socio-economic disadvantages stand in the way of literacy development. Equally crucial, for Roundtable participants, were systemic barriers arising from a lack of integration among the institutions that make up the learning system. The problem, for many participants, is that Canada has a highly decentralized system of education, training and learning.

The Roundtable underscored the need to be realistic in calling for systemic transformations. Yet, concerns were expressed that we may lack the means to launch major national learning initiatives. As several participants observed, the Canadian Constitution does not encourage lifelong learning, given that the historic division of powers between Ottawa and the provinces has created separate "turf" and issue "ownership." Federal-provincial attempts at cooperation only go so far. Thus, in early childhood education, the federal government is represented but does not play a major role; in labour market training, provinces have the mandate but often lack the resources or cooperation of other partners to follow through. Even so, bodies such as the Forum for Labour Market Ministers and the Council for Ministers of Education (CMEC) were seen by some participants has having the capacity to unite stakeholders around a societal learning project. Most participants therefore advocated a system-wide, multi-stakeholder approach to moving forward.

The thrust of this lively discussion was aptly summarized in one participant's comment that, on a host of learning issues, there is no "guardian" for learning. Here is the conundrum: given that education is a provincial responsibility, who will be leading the way on Canada-wide commitments?

Building on strengths. Focusing on opportunities to promote learning, several participants stressed the importance of building on the emerging consensus around the public value of education and learning. Canada has been a leader in literacy research and education, strengths we continue to build on. Informal learning does not suffer from the same constraints as formal learning, so there may be opportunities to link it with formal systems. Even though Canada is a world leader in school Internet access, and use by the adult population, there was no agreement about the potential benefits of e-learning.

In terms of opportunities to seek integration across the system, sector councils were one example of a cooperative, integrated approach that kept coming up in discussions as a successful, uniquely Canadian style of stakeholder cooperation. As well, someone described the signs of an integrated approach emerging as federal, provincial and territorial governments and Aboriginal communities devise new educational arrangements. The CMEC also was cited as having the potential to create a "pan-Canadian" approach to learning.

3) Identifying Outcomes

> *This theme built on the insights generated from discussions of Themes 1 and 2 to identify specific outcomes that will enable us to design actions, measure progress, and determine roles and responsibilities.*

Roundtable participants emphasized the need to move from talk to action, outlining the kinds of actions required to advance the learning vision. The Roundtable also struck a note of consensus on the need to identify principles that would help to define the roles and responsibilities of all the parties. To achieve change, one of the breakout groups advocated a new kind of "audacious leadership" on learning policy.

A new policy framework. One point emerging from the plenary discussions was the importance of developing specific programs within an overall public policy framework, with various participants giving examples of how Canadians have lived with the consequences of fragmented policy responses too long. Another participant asked: "Where are we going to find the wisdom to invest in new, innovative structures?"

This led to animated discussion in breakout groups and plenary sessions about the shape of the new "learning" model. One group developed the Vision for Canada's Learning System described on pages 1 and 2, and repeated in the box below.

A Vision for Canada's Learning System

1. Valuing and supporting universal early childhood education, making it an integral part of the learning system so that all children develop the literacy skills they need to become lifelong learners.

2. Investing in high quality, universal, publicly delivered primary and secondary education.

3. Ensuring excellence, equitable access, and program diversity within Canada's higher education system. Programs must provide a balance of technical, analytical and people skills. Universities must equally value and invest in humanities-based and science and technology-based disciplines. Educating the whole person and training for specific skills will occur simultaneously.

4. Enabling all adults to have ongoing opportunities to maintain and enhance literacy and learning skills. A wide range of disadvantaged groups – whose needs have been well documented – will require new resources to participate fully. Accordingly, greater recognition to prior formal and informal learning will facilitate the development and fuller use of people's talents.

Another group pointed out that governments are hesitant to ask questions about shortcomings in the current policy model. Yet, as several participants argued, governments will have to take the risk of initiating a new model for learning. Someone else proposed that the old model had already "blown up" and that what is new in the model being discussed at the Roundtable is its clear connection between supply (learners) and demand (the needs of society and the economy). Others countered that the old model has become destabilized, resulting in "silos" of fragmented policies and programs.

Collaborative governance. There was much discussion, and in the end general agreement, about creating a new form of governance for addressing learning and skills development – in short, a new policy paradigm. One group's recommendation for "transformational change" – in contrast to incremental change – captured the imaginations of participants in

plenary discussion. Another group elaborated on this point, suggesting that lifelong learning is itself a transformational strategy, given its potential to change how, where and what we learn across the life course.

Participants emphasized the importance of having an authoritative body design this new policy framework and machinery. A number of individuals called on the federal government to take the lead by enunciating what is needed for learning policy nationally. Yet, as Judith Maxwell, the Chair of the Roundtable, reminded participants in her opening remarks, "No single policy actor controls this agenda." So successful action requires broadly based collaboration.

Principles to Guide Action

Roundtable discussions coalesced around three guiding principles, which underpin the Vision for Learning and can serve as guides to action:

1) All Canadians need opportunities to learn throughout their lives in order to develop their potential and fully contribute to society. Such opportunities also ensure an innovative, globally competitive economy driven by an adaptable, highly skilled workforce.

2) Lifelong learning, as a process, must be both inclusive and diverse. Canada must strive to be an inclusive knowledge-based society in which nobody is left behind. And it must value and encourage diverse formal and informal learning activities in a range of contexts.

3) Governments must take the lead, providing supports, incentives and infrastructure, and convening the stakeholders. Action plans must be integrated, coordinated, evidence-based and contain accountability measures. The complexity of learning barriers and opportunities and the highly decentralized nature of the learning "system" make a collaborative approach necessary.

Priority Actions

Moving to action depends on strong leadership by existing organizations, such as the CMEC, which can generate a collaborative policy framework. We need to identify "heroes" of lifelong learning, widely share best practices and the benefits of learning investments, and develop action inventories. A further catalyst for action can be creative thinking about the appropriate incentives to get employers actively involved in promoting learning and new government funding mechanisms tied to strategic alliances. Perhaps most crucial, we must now plan long-term social investments in order to bring the most disadvantaged groups in society up to a level where they too can benefit from lifelong learning.

Roundtable participants recommended a future learning agenda based on specific actions and guided by the above principles. Here are the priorities enunciated in breakout groups and plenary sessions:

Early childhood

- Designate 1 percent of GDP to early childhood education by 2005.
- Strike an Early Childhood Education Task Force to create a national action plan, with the federal and provincial governments taking the lead and the active participation of providers and other stakeholder groups.
- Quadruple number of trained early childhood education instructors by 2008.

Disadvantaged groups

- Address the largest gaps in learning opportunities by removing barriers faced by specific disadvantaged groups, specifically Aboriginals, low-literacy adults, children in poor families, the working poor, and high school dropouts.
- Increase the supports to enable Aboriginal people to succeed at all levels of the education system. These supports could include targets for increased high school completion rates and easier access to the initial stages of higher education.

Target setting

- Commit to providing all individuals with basic literacy and numeracy skills. A specific goal is to assist all adults who currently lack basic education to achieve high school equivalency within five years.
- Set higher targets for participation and completion rates in high school and post-secondary educational programs and a timetable for meeting these targets.
- Ensure that the quality of our learning systems is recognized internationally as being "world class."
- Set targets and timetables for job-related skills upgrading and training.
- Build benchmarks, annual goals and accountability mechanisms built into all new investments in learning.

Expanded opportunities and choices

- Help people make informed choices about learning by clearly outlining the full range of learning opportunities.
- Develop and implement a lifelong learning training plan for trades/vocational training. Develop a communications plan to better inform and promote trades and vocational training system-wide.
- Value a wide range of skills, knowledge and competencies, from the specific to the general, from the technical to the intellectual and intuitive.

Financial resources

- Develop a learner financial support system that is universal, responsive, affordable, flexible and simplified.

- Address post-secondary education-related student debt loads by assisting students and graduates find paid work.

Strengthening infrastructure

- Sustained support for public education.
- Support more research into how we effectively teach and learn.
- Equip teachers and instructors with leading-edge skills so they can fully exploit new e-learning technologies.
- Invest in a common information base, including a new survey of formal and informal learning, a glossary of terms, and a database to track quality and outcomes for the education system from kindergarten to post-secondary.

Roles and Responsibilities

Progress on the learning vision requires, first and foremost, clearly defined roles and responsibilities for all major players. Regardless of which organization takes the lead on particular initiatives, it is essential that an inclusive view of "stakeholders" be used so that now-marginalized groups can contribute to creative learning solutions.

Governments. Governments have both individual and collective roles to play in achieving the Learning Vision set out in the final plenary session. To meet their collective responsibility, the Roundtable recommended that the CMEC could play an instrumental role if it had a mandate from First Ministers, launching a process designed to engage all the stakeholders. Federal-Provincial Action Teams could disseminate best learning practices, nationally and internationally, consolidating these into an inventory for use by all.

Employers. Employer support for learning is essential. This support could be mobilized by documenting the benefits of diverse forms of learning for innovation and competitiveness, organizational performance, and recruitment and retention. Employers and governments can jointly take the lead in recognizing prior learning experience. Another suggestion was to engage industry to support educational initiatives within their communities.

Other institutions. Sector councils are effective at achieving multi-stakeholder cooperation, so all levels of government should foster these. Existing bodies, such as the National Literacy Secretariat, should seek more effective funding and delivery models. Furthermore, there is much scope for post-secondary institutions to work together on learning, with the federal and provincial governments using their leverage to encourage this greater cooperation.

Individuals. Individuals too have a responsibility for learning. But the general sentiment at the Roundtable was that governments and employers, in particular, must work jointly to help provide the enabling conditions.

The Way Forward

Nobody at the Roundtable had any illusions about the completeness of the vision set out in the box above. It is best seen as a starting point for a bold Canadian project. A number of participants looked around the room and asked "Who else should be at this table?" or "Which groups are not here but should be?" They identified a need for more representation from marginalized groups and a far greater role for employers.

Of course, a single Roundtable of this size cannot be fully representative. Nor can it possibly cover all the angles on relevant issues. So the Roundtable participants want to invite wide debate on their recommendations as a vital step in the process of building a national learning agenda.

Contentious issues remain to be resolved: the right balance of individual and public responsibilities for learning; support for public education in the context of lifelong learning; accepted standards for learning outcomes; forging a consensus around the public value of learning; and specific policy instruments such as learning accounts. Undoubtedly the largest unresolved strategic issue at the Roundtable is the next step – or as stated by one of the breakout groups, "who should call the party" that would convene all stakeholders.

Reflecting on the themes in the Roundtable transcripts, one can see a route forward.

- *First*, there is a need for a dialogue at the highest levels on roles, responsibilities, goals and targets. This dialogue could begin with the Council of Ministers of Education of Canada, which could prepare a document for discussion by First Ministers – much like the *Report to Premiers* prepared in 1995 by the Ministerial Council on Social Policy Reform and Renewal. First Ministers could then set out goals and invite all the stakeholders to come forward with their commitments to a new way forward.

- *Second*, First Ministers could begin to mobilize their own governments and the key stakeholders to work on the implementation of these goals for Canada's learning system. To do this, First Ministers could mandate a number of working groups, involving all the stakeholders – governments plus employers, education and other institutions, and citizens – to provide advice on particular challenges that cross the borders of jurisdiction.

- *Third*, provinces and territories need to establish targets that turn the goals into realistic goals, and then to forge their own action plan for achieving those targets. Since the provinces and territories are at different starting points and face rather different financial and socio-economic challenges, they need to set their own pace and their own priorities.

These three steps will launch the kind of change sought by participants at the Roundtable. In this way, we can provide a concrete answer to a question posed by one participant: "There has already been lots of talk. How will tomorrow be different?"

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LEARNING IN THE 21ST CENTURY: KEY ISSUES AND QUESTIONS

Background Paper for the National Roundtable on Learning
19-20 March 2001, Telus Centre, Edmonton

Prepared by
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Roundtable Objectives:

As never before, access to ongoing learning opportunities is crucial for a high quality of life, economic innovation, and vibrant communities. Throughout the industrialized world, economic and social policy has converged around the importance of learning and skills development. However, all OECD member nations' stated commitment to the goal of 'life-long learning for all' does not mean that each nation will define this goal in similar terms, achieve it at the same time, or through the same policy means. This makes it crucial for Canadians to craft their own strategy for learning and skills development, with all stakeholder communities taking part in that process.

To this end, the Canadian Policy Research Networks' National Roundtable on Learning is gathering stakeholders from across Canada to discuss the basis for a shared agenda on skills and learning. This is one of three national roundtables, sponsored by Human Resources Development Canada, on learning and skills issues. In February, the Centre for the Study of Living Standards held a very successful consultation in Ottawa, which focused on how to create a more efficient labour market. In April, the Conference Board of Canada will involve the private sector in a roundtable discussion on building and sustaining a culture of innovation and entrepreneurship.

This Background Paper is intended to stimulate discussion and debate by highlighting some issues and questions that are central to a learning and skills agenda. It outlines three themes – assessing learning and skills needs, removing barriers and accessing opportunities, and identifying learning outcomes – around which the Roundtable agenda is organized. Below, a selection of issues is raised under each theme, followed by a list of six discussion questions. *These issues and questions are intended to generate focused discussion at the Roundtable about the guiding principles for future actions to promote learning and skills development.* Participants will then explore these themes in smaller groups, within which they are invited to set priorities and incorporate other issues or questions that they consider relevant.

A useful starting point for a discussion of learning and skills is the report of the Expert Panel on Skills (Prime Minister's Advisory Council on Science and Technology), *Stepping Up – Skills and Opportunities in the Knowledge Economy* (http://acst-ccst.gc.ca). The Expert Panel focused on labour force skills in five strategic industries: aerospace, automotive, biotechnologies, environmental technologies, and information and

communications technologies. It also pointed to the larger challenges we face, as the Expert Panel observed:

> *Today, the 'supply' of learning must be continuously available and easily accessible to 'demands' by parents and families of very young children, and by older children and young adults, disadvantaged groups, and the incumbent work force. It needs to be delivered in a variety of modes and at times and locations that are convenient to learners, firms and other organizations.*

In the language of the Expert Panel, then, the National Roundtable on Learning will examine the full range of supply and demand issues in learning, with each discussion group encouraged to establish its own priorities.

THEME 1: ***Assessing Needs***

Skills, life-long learning, knowledge-based economy – these terms are now common parlance, but also widely debated and not easy to define. For example, few would dispute the point, made in the 2001 Speech from the Throne, that: "Canada will only realize its full potential by investing aggressively in the skills and talents of its people." All the same, it still remains open for debate just what kinds of skills are most needed, as well as by whom they are needed.

The Expert Panel found no evidence of a generalized shortage of technical skills in the five sectors it examined. While acknowledging that the education and training system has produced as many or more technically skilled people as industry has been able to absorb, the Expert Panel concluded that a pressing need remains for individuals who combine these technical skills with management and essential skills – such as in literacy, numeracy, communication, teamwork, computers, thinking, analysis and problem-solving, as well as in positive work attitudes and behaviour.

The Panel also expressed more concern about a shortage of opportunities than about a shortage of skilled workers. This raises the general point that skills are characteristics of both individual workers and jobs. Thus, skills should be viewed from both the supply and the demand sides of the labour market. As a goal, Canada should aim to match highly skilled workers to equally skills-intensive jobs. Yet mismatches between workers skills and job requirements are still leading to under-utilized human capital.

All the same, areas of skills shortages remain. On the one hand, at an aggregate level Canadians' skills have risen to meet rising demand from industry. On the other, however, employers in specific industries, firms and regions continue to report shortages of certain types of occupational skills. Recent studies by the Conference Board of Canada and the Canadian Federation of Independent Business point to unfilled positions in small- and medium-sized businesses – a situation that could worsen as demographics create skills shortages in the next decade. Reconciling these disparate views of current and future skills needs requires common definitions and measurement tools.

A related issue is distinguishing between credentials – say, a diploma or degree from a specific post-secondary program, or a professional certification – and the specific skills, knowledge and abilities acquired through that program. Are the skills most needed in a knowledge-based economy and society those typically associated with a traditional vocational approach to training? Or in a future where life-long learning is expected to be the norm, does a broad 'generalist' education offer the most solid foundation?

The relative merits of vocational versus general education have been debated since the 1950s. Recent contributions to the debate suggest that, over time, social science and humanities graduates reap rates of return similar to those for science and engineering graduates. Furthermore, the demand for 'soft' skills can be expected to grow as the information technology revolution transforms business and government, creating even more complex human and social problems.

This debate aside, there is no doubt that Canada has failed to attract adequate numbers of young people into the skilled trades through apprenticeships. At issue, then, is finding the right balance of scientific, vocational and general academic skills that will build a knowledge-based economy and society. Canada needs well-trained engineers, computer scientists and construction trades people. But it also needs workers who can deal with the human, social and ethical sides of new technology, globalization, and a host of other powerful trends that will shape the future.

The Conference Board of Canada's 1992 Employability Skills Profile has had an enormous impact on discussions about learning needs. Yet, as a recent Conference Board Employability Skills Forum concluded, it is difficult to measure employability skills (defined as academic, personal and team-work skills) with accuracy, since their very nature often depends on the unique contexts in which such skills will be used.

Life-long learning casts our minds into the future, away from the immediate skills that employers seek. Again, however, life-long learning can be an elusive notion. Depending on one's perspective, its goals range from enabling workers to make certain industries more innovative and competitive, improving the quality of life and strengthening citizenship, to meeting more personal needs for human growth and fulfillment.

Since human talent is regarded as the key resource in a knowledge-based economy, inclusiveness in learning activities becomes a considerable policy challenge. Today, there are clear winners and losers in learning and skills development. Whether it is educational credentials, employer-provided training, or job-related informal learning, those who have the most get even more. Consequently, socially vulnerable or marginalized groups risk being left even further behind. Which groups are most at risk of being left out of this process, and how can we ensure that their needs are met? Strong and persistent links exist between a person's social background and their educational pathways and attainment – making for a cycle that is very difficult to break.

Questions:

Questions that address this theme focus on defining and assessing the learning and skills needs of specific groups of individuals, sectors, and types of employers. The time frame stretches from the present to the medium- and long-term. After a preliminary discussion of the theme, each group should focus on the question(s) that it considers most important.

1. How are the terms 'learning' and 'skills' defined by different stakeholders? Can we create a common language for discussing these issues?
2. What are the most important learning and skills needs for disadvantaged groups, including: youth who have dropped out of high school; displaced older workers; children and adult members of poor families; adults with low literacy skills; Aboriginal persons; some recent immigrants and refugees; and persons with disabilities? Do we have the right tools to assess these diverse learning needs?
3. How can we assess employers' current skills and knowledge requirements, capturing the needs of all sectors and types of organizations?
4. How are learning and skills needs of individuals and employers likely to change over the next decade?
5. What are the most effective ways to disseminate information on learning and skills needs?
6. How can we prepare for industry's future skills needs, given the rapid and complex nature of economic change?

THEME 2: *Removing Barriers and Accessing Opportunities*

Learning is central to the renewed sense of citizenship that Canadians must forge for the 21st century. As Judith Maxwell observed in a recent CPRN report, *Toward a Common Citizenship*: "Learning is fast becoming the centerpiece of citizenship rights in Canada, from early childhood to retirement." Accordingly, citizens' rights to learning, education and skills development opportunities are paramount, and will be requisite for the achievement of social and economic goals. Yet many barriers must first be eradicated, and new opportunities created, if we are to put the ideal of 'life-long learning for all' into practice.

Many factors raise barriers that prevent specific groups from gaining full access to learning opportunities. Canada's high overall post-secondary participation rate internationally contrasts with our persistent inequalities based on individuals' socio-economic backgrounds. Despite remarkable post-secondary education gains by women in the past two decades, key fields – particularly science, engineering and technology – remain male-dominated. Literacy and numeracy skills vary significantly by province. Teens graduating from high school in rural areas are less likely than are urban graduates to participate in university education. Many Aboriginal children view high school graduation as unattainable. Newcomer youths face language and cultural barriers to participating in higher education.

For many adults, a scarcity of time is the main barrier to pursuing further education and training. Over half of employed Canadians feel time pressures, especially parents working full-time – pressures that increased during the 1990s. This results in higher stress levels and less time for learning activities. Among managers and professionals in particular, rising work hours and workloads have turned new training or learning initiatives into just another demand.

More generally, Canada's commitment to universal access to education needs to be adapted to a culture of life-long learning. Total government investments in higher education have declined steadily in real terms since 1980. Families and individuals are paying an increasing share of learning costs, from early childhood to post-secondary and adult education. This tacit shift in the balance of responsibility from governments to individuals and families creates potential economic barriers to learning for people with low and middle incomes.

The socio-economic barriers to learning are also evident in the 'digital divide.' Households in which computers and the Internet are used tend to be wealthier and better-educated. Clearly, this raises a barrier that future 'e-learning' strategies will need to overcome.

Similar patterns are found with respect to workplace training. Right across the industrialized world, the most educated and skilled workers tend to get the most additional job-related training.

Literacy is strongly related to economic opportunities in life and well being – making it imperative to 'raise the floor' for literacy. Individuals with weak literacy skills, however, seldom perceive them as a problem; as a result, they are hard to reach through typical adult education and training programs. At the same time, we must also recognize that literacy skills can be lost if they are not used.

Access to high-quality job-related training opportunities is also a central feature of life-long learning. However, a cluster of labour market trends raise concerns about future access to training for certain groups: own-account self-employed workers; home-based workers; workers in part-time jobs; and temporary and contract workers.

Full-time enrolment in vocational programs at public trade schools and community colleges dropped slightly from 1983-97. The very organization of apprenticeship systems acts as a barrier to vocational training, as does the low esteem in which manual trades are commonly held.

Canadians' overall educational attainments are generally the highest among OECD nations. This provides a solid foundation on which to build further learning and skills initiatives. However, existing human capital is far from being utilized. About one in four workers is overqualified due to a mismatch between their job's skill requirements and their education and skills. As the National Graduates Survey shows, this mismatch occurs across a range of core skills among highly educated young people – the 'knowledge workers' of tomorrow. This stems, in part, from credentialism, when employers artificially raise entry requirements; but it mostly reflects the low skill-content of jobs.

In terms of actual participation in post-secondary education, enrolment numbers have been stable for full-time students, and declining for part-time students, right across the post-secondary system. A complex set of social, demographic, economic, and political factors influenced post-secondary enrolment patterns in the 1990s. While their relative importance and interactions are not well understood, it is clear that creating greater access for a wider range of social groups will be indispensable for life-long learning. By international standards, Canada has a flexible and relatively accessible post-secondary educational system; it now needs to enhance both of these features.

We also have a solid foundation on which to build new forms of learning. Canada ranks second, behind Sweden, in Internet exposure by students in the K-to-12 system. The Advisory Committee for Online Learning (a collaboration between Industry Canada and the Council of Ministers of Education) recently articulated the importance of creating a culture of life-long learning as a foundation to building a civil and prosperous society. The Committee outlined the potential of new learning tools to expand access to educational and learning opportunities.

The learning process is basically embedded in social relationships. Research emanating from the National Longitudinal Survey of Children and Youth suggests that a spectrum of family, school and community factors makes for healthy behavioural and developmental childhood outcomes – the foundations for positive life-long learning. Learning draws on social capital while simultaneously building on it. People's interactions in schools, workplaces, communities and families can foster learning. This informal learning is often overlooked as a source of job and life skills.

Questions:

The questions below address two related issues: the barriers that specific individuals or employers face in meeting their learning needs (Qs. 1 to 3), and actual or potential opportunities that can enhance an individual's or organization's capacity to meet learning needs (Qs. 4 to 6). When discussing one of more of these questions in break-out groups, participants may choose to limit their focus to one or several groups/ sectors/ firm types whose learning needs were identified under Theme 1.

1. What are the major barriers to meeting the learning needs of specific social groups and society as a whole?
2. What are the major barriers to meeting employers' skills requirements?
3. What changes are required to make fuller use of existing skills and knowledge within workplaces?
4. What are the most effective ways to create accessible, inclusive learning opportunities for individuals at all stages of their adult lives?
5. What incentives, resources and actions are needed for employers to create 'learning organizations'?
6. In order to expand learning opportunities, what is the ideal balance of roles and responsibilities among individuals and families, communities, learning institutions, employers and governments?

THEME 3: ***Identifying Outcomes***

Moving from ideas to actions requires a comprehensive plan that spells out short-, medium- and long-term goals. When identifying the most important individual, organizational and societal outcomes, it is crucial to determine how responsibility for achieving these goals will be shared among individuals, governments, learning institutions, employers and other stakeholder communities.

Some outcomes are very concrete. For example, the Forum of Labour Market Ministers has identified four key learning-related policy outcomes: keep youth in school; improve the prospects for Aboriginal youth; more effectively prepare high school students who enter the workforce directly; and ensure continued access to post-secondary education for all youth.

Other outcomes are less tangible. Take, for instance, citizens' rights and entitlements to learning opportunities. If meaningful learning opportunities are embedded in our definition of citizenship, then surely a key learning outcome is to cultivate the requisite skills for active citizenship – the capacity to participate fully in all aspects of social and economic life. Once we accept that all citizens have the right to gain access to high-quality learning opportunities, it becomes incumbent on all stakeholders to devise effective ways to ensure quality outcomes.

Pushing this point further raises the issue of the minimum levels of education, training, and other forms of learning that we should set as goals. And how do we tackle educational disadvantages, underachievement and resulting social exclusion? Canada's commitment to the OECD goal of 'life-long learning for all' raises the bar in all these respects. Indeed, the greatest policy challenge may be to find ways to close the 'learning outcomes' gap reflected by those who have the best start to learning, from childhood, and who leverage their advantage for better learning opportunities through their adult lives.

The Council of Ministers of Education's September 1999 Declaration reiterates that education is a life-long process, and that we must "create a learning society in which the acquisition, renewal, and use of knowledge are cherished." Its future image of Canadian society is one that depends on "informed and educated citizens" who jointly fulfill their own goals while at the same time contributing to social and economic progress.

This is the broad view of learning and its outcomes which accepts that learning is a complex, evolving process that requires the support of many stakeholders. No single set of outcomes may suffice; interventions today may only pay off years or decades hence. For example, a healthy launch of the learning process is crucial, since active learning during the adult years depends on investments in early childhood education, in support for parents of young children, and even in certain pre-natal programs (e.g., fetal alcohol syndrome prevention) – all areas where many Canadians expect governments to undertake major initiatives.

It is thereby crucial for all stakeholder communities to agree on who will take the lead on specific actions and areas of shared responsibility. But, as the Expert Panel cautions, the tumultuous 'new economy' is blurring the once distinct roles and responsibilities of the public and private sectors. Furthermore, it has become more important for employers, workers, unions and professional associations to work together to create the conditions that will promote the most effective use of human resources through continuous learning and skills development. As steps are taken in this direction, successes and failures must be documented, and the lessons disseminated widely.

A final word on the future 'learning organizations.' While some employers already claim to have created true learning organizations, we must be careful to separate theory and rhetoric from actual practice. Lacking is a conceptual tool kit to enable us to assess how far an organization has moved along the 'learning' continuum. A high priority, then, is to emphasize measurement and accountability within organizations for meeting learning and skills development goals.

Questions:

Based on their discussions of Themes 1 and 2, break-out groups will now use the insights they have generated to identify specific outcomes that will enable us to design actions, measure progress, and determine roles and responsibilities.

1. What are the most important learning outcomes for specific groups discussed in earlier themes?
2. Should certain kinds of skills, abilities and knowledge be set as national, provincial or sectoral learning goals?
3. More generally, what are the key 'life-long learning' outcomes for all citizens?
4. Should specific learning outcomes be developed for young people making the transition from school to work?
5. What would be the key indicators for tracking the development of a 'learning culture' in Canada?
6. How do we use these outcomes to create action plans?